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INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 003148

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/DORAN/MARCHESE/SINGH
STATE FOR NEA/ELA, NEA/FO:ATACHCO

E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/27/2016

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: FPM OFFICIAL PREVIEWS PARTY CONFERENCE,
POLITICAL GOALS

Classified By: Jeffrey D. Feltman, Ambassador. Reason: Section 1.4 (d)
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SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Ibrahim Kanaan, MP and top FPM party official, told emboffs that this weekend's FPM Conference for the Displaced will not be a political rally, though its timing may suggest otherwise. He described the FPM's immediate political aims as limited to a national unity government and denied any interest in removing PM Siniora from office or enhancing the powers of the presidency, the office so clearly sought by FPM leader Michel Aoun. On Hizballah's arms, Kanaan trotted out familiar positions including the Shia need for weapon to "balance" the financial might of Christians and Sunnis. He assessed that the FPM had lost some support recently but that Aoun remains the Christian community's most popular leader -- by some measures. Kanaan denied an alarming interpretation of Hizballah leader Nasrallah's September 22 speech. Finally, he accepted a demarche on FPM's financial links with Hizballah and said that the problem "is being taken care of."
End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) Polchief, the Ambassador's Special Assistant, and Polstaff visited Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) MP and top party official Ibrahim Kanaan at his residence on September 26. Joining Kanaan were three FPM activists, including Michel Aoun's nephew Alain Aoun.

CONFERENCE FOR THE DISPLACED

¶3. (C) We asked Kanaan about the FPM's planned Conference for the Displaced, scheduled for September 30. The Conference is widely seen as an opportunity for FPM leader Michel Aoun to make a public riposte against Lebanese Forces leader Samir Ja'ja', who addressed a large pro-March 14 rally of Christians in Harissa on September 24. The Conference is not a political event and had been planned for years, Kanaan maintained. Polchief noted that Aoun needed a big event to counter Ja'ja's rally and dovetail with September 22 rally. This, plus the fact that there had been no announcement of the Conference until Ja'ja' was at the podium last Sunday, strongly suggested that Aoun's principal interest in holding a Conference is to obtain a political platform. Kanaan smiled at this as if to acknowledge it was true.

14. (C) Nevertheless, according to Kanaan, the FPM has prepared copious records and reporting on the issue of the Displaced and hopes to have a successful Conference. As Kanaan explained the issue, tens of thousands of Christian inhabitants of the Chouf were driven out by Druze militia during the Lebanese Civil War. While the Council of the Displaced has operated since the early 1980's under the direction of Walid Jumblatt, it has spent USD 3-4 billion but has resettled few Christians in the Chouf. The majority of the displaced remain in Beirut and other cities to which they fled. (Note: The focus on the Council's role, while perhaps justified in light of the institution's undoubted corruption, is an opportunity for the FPM to both grab the spotlight and smear March 14 member Walid Jumblatt. End Note.)

FPM POLITICAL AIMS

15. (C) Kanaan repeated the key FPM demand for a national unity government consisting of a Council of Ministers enlarged to include ministers appointed by Michel Aoun. Polchief told Kanaan that the proposal sounded like it would create gridlock in the GOL. Further to this, he continued, the Siniora government enjoys tremendous support among the international community at present. Any attempt to topple the Siniora government -- constitutionally or otherwise -- would not be likely to meet with support or approval from Lebanon's partners.

16. (C) Kanaan countered that forming a new government did not mean replacing Siniora, whom he acknowledged had done a good and competent job of managing the July-August crisis and continued to be a competent technocrat. Kanaan was at pains to stress that the FPM would deal with Siniora; Kanaan

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minimized the harsh words that Siniora and Aoun had exchanged in early September and mentioned that he and Aoun have been invited, and will go, to PM Siniora's Iftar at the Serail on Friday evening. (When asked, Kanaan said laughingly that he has not yet received any invitation to the Qureitem Iftars being thrown by Saad al-Hariri each evening this month.)

17. (C) Another top FPM interest is electoral reform followed by early parliamentary elections. After ripping the international community for pushing for early elections in 2005 -- an FPM litany -- the party now agreed that reform of the Syrian-installed electoral law should be a first priority. Kanaan said he is unimpressed with the work of ex-minister Fouad Boutros, who headed the commission to propose a new law, and says that the FPM will introduce suggestions or even a draft of its own. The group debated whether Lebanon could hold early parliamentary elections. While not all the FPM members present were as certain that Lebanon's parliament can be dissolved before the expiration of its term in 2009, Kanaan asserted, without going into specifics, that there are constitutional interpretations to justify early elections.

18. (C) Although Michel Aoun's apparent bid for the presidency was not discussed directly, Polchief asked whether Aoun has any interest in enhancing the power of the president. At present, he observed, the post does not exercise much real power. Kanaan responded that while there are no clear plans "for now," there are additional powers that could be added to the presidency under "a full implementation of Ta'if." He added that the Lahoud presidency is an aberration in that Lahoud is isolated and has no political allies.

HIZBALLAH'S ARMS

19. (C) We repeatedly asked Kanaan to acknowledge that Hizballah's arsenal is an unnatural, destabilizing and dangerous feature in Lebanese politics, but he stuck faithfully to the FPM party line. Disarming Hizballah is

desirable and achievable but cannot be accomplished by force.

The Sheba'a Farms and prisoner issues may be mere pretexts, but once they are removed Hizballah will have no more excuse to keep weapons. Hizballah's weapons are not directed internally. The Shia need weapons to balance the power conferred upon the Sunni and Christians by their financial resources and foreign backers.

¶10. (C) Against these points, we refuted Kanaan's implication that the international community is seeking forcible disarmament of Hizballah. We also cast doubt that Sheba'a and the prisoners would be Hizballah's last excuses to keep weapons; the party would find other excuses and make other demands before disarming. And finally, we pointed out the contradiction of the last two points: if Hizballah does not use its weapons to influence internal Lebanese politics, then how does keeping those weapons "balance" the Shia's power against that of the Sunni and Christians? The best policy, we said, is for Lebanese political figures on all sides to stop giving political cover to Hizballah and start (at least) saying the right things: that it is unacceptable for the party to keep its weapons and, especially, for it to undertake unilateral armed action.

IS HIZBALLAH GOOD FOR FPM'S POLITICAL FORTUNES?

¶11. (C) Polchief asked Kanaan about the FPM's political fortunes, which appeared to take a hit following the war and particularly following the Lebanese Forces rally. Kanaan responded that according to an An-Nahar poll, Aoun was selected as the most popular choice among Christians for a ministerial post (75 percent in favor according to Kanaan), even if he would not accept to serve as a minister. Kanaan added bashfully that he had himself placed second in the poll. Nevertheless, FPM's popularity had dipped by a few points since the war, Kanaan acknowledged, but he predicted the party would recover.

HIZBALLAH RALLY

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¶12. (C) We asked Kanaan about some potential interpretations of Hassan Nasrallah's September 22 speech. For one thing, did he mean to imply that a "clean state" -- that is, a corruption-free one -- was a further condition for Hizballah to disarm? Kanaan said that that interpretation is a misunderstanding and that clearly corruption is a pervasive problem that will be hard to solve. Hizballah's conditions for disarming are clear and limited to Sheba'a and prisoners.

In fact, Kanaan takes credit on behalf of the FPM for the fact that Hizballah has made its conditions clear and gone on record that it will disarm when they are met. We noted that the conditions do not always appear so clear.

DEMARCHE

¶13. (C) In a pull-aside, Polchief delivered to Kanaan a demarche on Hizballah aid and financial resources. Kanaan was familiar with the issue. Polchief stated that while the USG has no desire to blacklist, defame or destroy the FPM, and in fact would like to work with the FPM, the party could easily find itself in legal difficulties because of its dealings with Hizballah. In addition, those dealings make it hard for policymakers in the international community to see the FPM as a part of the solution to Lebanon's difficulties, as opposed to being part of the problem. Kanaan focused on the terrorist financing aspect of the demarche and said that "this is being taken care of."

FELTMAN